Annotated Bibliography for Wendt Project:
“Telling the Truth about Christian Ethics”

The entries in this bibliography are resources for a project in the Spring 2006 faculty group of the Wendt Initiative. The project is to integrate more on the history of Christian ethics in the two-semester course on Church History at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary.

The items chosen are recent scholarly surveys of the ethical teachings of individual theologians and movements. They will be arranged according to the historical era of the subjects, and generally chronologically within the era, with the hope that the reader will get a sense of the development of Christian ethical teachings by reading the annotations.

I have taken the liberty of adding some explanation as to the importance of each figure examined, as well as adding relevant background where simply examining the article would not help some readers.

FIFTH CENTURY

Augustine (354-430), bishop of Hippo in North Africa in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, is the most influential theologian in Western Christianity. On many, many theological topics, one must still consider Augustine’s views, for even if later thinkers do not agree with him, they will often have to respond to his concerns.

Kent’s summary of Augustine’s ethical teaching shows that, in agreement with the philosophers of antiquity, Augustine viewed the ethical life as the quest for the truly happy life. He disagreed with those who saw happiness in the quest for truth (since the quest assumes that they do not ever attain it) and those who saw happiness as fully attainable in this life (since the truest happiness is unending).

So where does our happiness lie? Not in perfection of behavior. Augustine’s opponents, the Pelagians, believed that perfect obedience and holiness were required of all Christians. To Augustine I suspect this requirement of perfection would be a way to misery rather than happiness, and therefore not a good ethical guide. After all, Augustine points out, no examples can be found of true sinless perfection, even among the saints. Augustine’s conviction in this regard stems from his understanding that the virtue of an act is measured, not by an outward law, but by one’s inner motivation. Even those who behave well have all kinds of mixed and ugly motives.

To be truly right, our actions must be rightly motivated, with choices made according to the intrinsic value of things. We tend to make choices based instead on utilitarian values: we think about the way things serve our personal preferences and desires. On the ultimate scale of intrinsic values, no created thing is more valuable than the Creator, God. Therefore, in all we do we are to love God above all things for his own intrinsic value. Having this love in place, other things can be loved to an appropriate degree. Another way to put this is that God is to be “enjoyed” while all of creation is of
relatively less value and so is either “used,” or enjoyed for the sake of the God who created them.

Unfortunately, we human beings have inherited a damaged nature, and we find that we cannot of our own free will love God first in all things. The ability to do good in this sense comes only when God takes action in our hearts. True happiness, and therefore truly righteous action, comes when all our loves are in order—when God moves within us by grace so that we are motivated by the love of God first of all, and the love of neighbor as God’s creation.

THIRTEENTH CENTURY

Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225-1274), the great Dominican theologian of the thirteenth century, developed his masterwork the Summa Theologiae as a concise, clear introduction to Christian theology for students. Today’s theological students tend to disagree that Aquinas’ work is concise, clear, or introductory, but its importance is undeniable. It is the greatest of the medieval theological summae, even though it was incomplete at the author’s death. It has come into and out of favor among Roman Catholic theologians, but Aquinas was for generations the one theologian whom Catholic theological students were required to read.

Stephen Pope points out that Aquinas did not set out to write an ethical treatise. Instead he sought to write about all theological topics from a coherent perspective, providing a useful and influential framework within which one can consider ethical issues. Ethical teaching is, in fact, found throughout the Summa. Likewise he is not concerned in his ethical teaching to focus on the particulars of what is right or wrong in individual cases. This is because Aquinas considers all things in creation from a “teleological” perspective—he considers the “ends” for which things were created more important than the specific acts that they perform along the way. The goodness of one’s acts has to do with whether they help one to become what one was created to be, and we were created to live in contemplation of God, knowing God and living in friendship with God. Acts that seem in themselves good (giving to the poor, for example) are not good if doing them leads to our own pride (which is quite the opposite of giving out of love for a poor person, and in humility before God).

Pope has us look at Aquinas’ ethical thought within the frame of his theology as a whole as expressed in the structure of the Summa. There are three parts: First Aquinas considers God as creator of all, including humanity. Second, (and this is where the core of his ethical thought is found) he considers humanity as created by God and the kinds of actions humans take to try to get back to God. Third, he examines the ways that God has taken action to reach out to humanity and bring humanity back to himself through Jesus Christ. As with other classical Western theologians, Aquinas sees human sin as preventing us from reaching our goal on our own steam. That is, our end or goal is to return to God, but we cannot get there. This is because sin has damaged all of humanity, limiting human capacity to live the kind of life that leads to a harmonious relationship with God.
We can do some good things on our own (the “cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude” [p. 34]), and we are expected to train ourselves in them and grow into better people by making these virtues our “habits”. What we really need to live in the friendship of God, however, are the “theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity” (p. 34). For these we need the help of God’s grace in Christ to empower us. This grace comes through reception of the sacraments.

There is much more in this densely packed chapter, and in the book as a whole, but this outline is enough to give the picture of an ethics aimed at shaping a person’s character through virtue, but not in ways we might think of immediately in our culture. First, the goal of right character is unabashedly theological and spiritual. Only a life lived in intimate fellowship with God, in fact eternal contemplation of God, is true to our created nature and therefore good. Second, we cannot finally reach this goal by our own work, despite the genuine value of the good we do, but God has taken the initiative in Jesus Christ to give us the Church and the sacraments to bring us his grace to help us to the goal.

SIXTEENTH CENTURY


Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a late medieval Augustinian monk and priest and professor of Bible whose explorations of the Apostle Paul’s writings led to a thorough rethinking of the nature of the Christian faith in the early 16th century. His personal discovery rocked Europe and he became the most prominent leader in the Protestant Reformation. Though the Lutheran tradition is one distinct strand of Protestant Christianity, Luther’s insights have influenced all the others as well. He wrote voluminously but not systematically. On many topics his views must be gleaned from treatises written in highly contested written debates on topics sometimes quite removed from the modern inquirer’s interests. This has led scholars to draw varying conclusions as to Luther’s views on even major topics.

Wannenwetsch’s chapter shows that this has been the case on Luther’s ethical thought. As well as laying out a much clearer system of Luther’s ethical thought than Luther himself ever provided, the author spends a significant amount of space arguing against prominent earlier interpreters. Most of this debate is not germane to this bibliography, with the following exception.

Interpreters have often read Luther as discounting the importance of ethics. Luther’s great theological concern was “justification” or the way that guilty, sinful human beings can be “justified” or made righteous before a holy God, and restored to a harmonious relationship with God. In his own day the Catholic Church of the late Middle Ages taught that one must do all of “good works” of love that one can do before one can be restored to God’s favor. Theologians noted that the Apostle Paul said people were justified by faith, but they said that this faith had to be “faith formed by love”. Luther had found in his own life that such good works did nothing to relieve his guilty conscience or make him the kind of person God desired; his good works only affected the outer person without affecting the inner life where one relates to God.
In studying Paul he came to be convinced that the late medieval theologians had it backwards. What was needed was “love formed by faith.” If one had faith of the kind Paul wrote about (true trust in the promises God makes to us in Jesus Christ—trust that in Christ we are truly forgiven) then our inner life will be changed because our relationship with God is on an entirely new footing. No longer is God our righteous Judge; now God is our loving Father. With this changed relationship to God we are changed within, becoming like God in some ways, and so different kinds of behavior come out in our lives.

This complex of ideas, as well as the polemical and hyperbolic way that Luther expressed them, led him to make statements that sound like ethics really do not matter. He can say that good works actually get in the way of justification. He can say that all that matters is faith, and if one has faith one need not worry about good works, as anything done out of faith is good. Also one finds in Luther a strong tendency to discuss the Law of God in the Old Testament as a polar opposite to the Gospel of Christ in the New. In prominent locations he says that the law leads to social restraint of bad behavior, and to a conviction of our own guilt before God, but it does not have an ongoing function in guiding Christian ethics.

Wannenwetsch points out that these parts of Luther’s thought on justification are not his only words on the topic of ethics. Of particular interest is his examination of Luther’s later Genesis commentary. There the reformer shows the law as part of the original creation. It is part of the original state of righteousness, not just a remedy added after humanity’s fall into sin and guilt. Apart from justification, though, humanity cannot live into this good law. Christ is the one who fulfills and overcomes the law in its problematic sense of condemnation. Baptized into Christ and living by faith we are able to experience the original sense of the law as joyful guide to Christian ethical life. Though Wannenwetsch’s treatment shows this view as a revision of typical views on Luther, he does not note that it is a view of the law strongly associated with Calvin.

The author goes on to show that for Luther this ethical life under the law is lived out in social contexts. There are three contexts created by God within which we live out the Christian ethical life: In Luther’s terms these are “economics, politics, and church” (quoted on p. 130). In vernacular terms, he means the household or family, the community or public life, and the church. The contexts are not optional, but are created as human beings themselves are created, and are where all Christians must live out their ethical lives if they are to flourish and be obedient to God. Within the heart and mind of the believer, and in every context of the believer’s life, the focus is paradoxically passive: We live and act in response to what God has done and is doing in Christ. This is seen most clearly in worship where both Word and Sacrament are places where God is heard and received, the free gift of God always preceding our action of response.


John Calvin (1509-1564) was less than ten years old when Luther achieved his first fame. He became a leader among the second generation of the Protestant Reformation, and built on the foundation laid by Luther and many others. Calvin’s
writings were much more systematic than Luther’s, as he sought to weave the scattered threads of the teachings of the first generation of reformers into a seamless presentation of what Protestants believed the Bible taught.

Though he had much sympathy with Luther’s teachings, Calvin was not a Lutheran. He led a different, analogous sixteenth-century movement known as the “Reformed” churches from his exile in Geneva. The Reformed became the dominant form of Christianity in Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Scotland, as well as influencing the Church of England. Though they never displaced Catholicism in France, Calvin’s work supported a very prominent network of Reformed Churches there. On a smaller scale the scattered groups of Protestants in Italy were also allied with Calvin’s version of the faith.

Gunther Haas’s survey of Calvin’s ethical thought focuses on the place of the Law of God, and is perhaps best understood if one keeps in mind what he summarizes at the end of the chapter: Calvin’s understanding of ethics is dynamic, not rigidly legalistic. He would have Christians interpret the law in light of God’s intentions as lawgiver, guided by an understanding of equity and with Christ as living example, always understanding the necessity of the Holy Spirit to give right understanding of God’s will even in Scripture.

To summarize (and rearrange) Haas, Calvin shows all people obliged to keep God’s law, whether they are conscious of the Bible’s teaching in the Ten Commandments or not. There is an ethical law established by God in the order of nature to which all are bound, God’s grace allowing knowledge of the natural order and moral law among all people.

The Bible, however, and particularly the Ten Commandments, summarizes God’s revealed will for human ethical living. Christ’s summary of the law in two commandments (to love God with all one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love one’s neighbor as one’s self) has a special place. It serves as a summary of the Ten Commandments, the first four relating to the love of God and the last six to love of neighbor. As in Luther’s teaching, the law functions to restrain bad behavior in society and to reveal where we stand guilty before God, and therefore where we are in need of the grace and mercy of Christ. But more explicitly than in Luther, for Calvin the law has a third use in guiding the Christian believer in his or her search for God’s will.

This third use comes into effect only through a change of heart that happens in the believer through union with Christ. The goal of the Christian life, and therefore of Christian ethics, is the transformation of the believer’s life, conceived of as the restoration of the image of God, which is otherwise damaged by sin. Thus in Calvin’s thought one finds a strong emphasis not only on justification (see the previous entry) but on sanctification—the progressive growth of the believer in a holy Christ-like life. In a sense this is about imitation of Christ, though this is more a matter of transformation to his character than attempting to do the very particular actions Christ did. We are to bear the cross, we are to live in humility, we are to practice self-denial for the good of our neighbor, and we are to live according to God’s will revealed in the law.

Haas summarizes well a variety of points related to the interpretation of the law. The biblical law provides a clear norm for ethical life, and should be seen as the expression of God’s will for human living. (This takes a good deal of the mystery out of the question of “seeking God’s will” for Reformed Christians, by the way. One does not
immediately start listening for voices and looking for signs. One starts with what God has already said to do.) But one must think with care about the law found in Scripture: Some is about ceremonial life in ancient Israel, and this is not in force for Christians. Some of it is judicial case law, and one must distinguish between the particular forms required in Israel (which are not binding on us) and the principles of justice and equity which the cases teach us (which are binding still). When interpreting the law one needs the help of the Holy Spirit to arrive at the right meaning. Also one must follow right principles: The law is more significantly aiming at the people’s inner life or integrity as whole people than at their outward behavior. One should look to God’s intention in giving a particular law, since commandments are often very terse. Thus the command on adultery has implications for all of human sexuality. Likewise commands that forbid one thing tend to require something opposite to it, and commands that require something tend to implicitly forbid something else. Christ, the incarnation of the God who gave the law, must be allowed to be the interpreter of the law, both through his teachings and his actions in the Gospels. Finally, with much in common with Augustine but seemingly less so with Luther, love is emphatically the thing that fulfills the law.

The ethical life is lived out in the context of the world and the church. The Christian shares Christ’s “dominion” (sometimes referred to more happily as “stewardship”) over creation, and each person lives out their particular calling or vocation for the good of all. Haas emphasizes more strongly than others that for Calvin the Church is a necessary context for the living of the ethical Christian life. Joined to Christ we are necessarily joined to his body, the Church, the varied and complicated human community of Christians who worship together and seek together to fulfill Christ’s mission. Life in the Church shapes us if we participate fully in it. This was particularly true in Calvin’s day, when Reformed churches exercised very intentional corporate discipline, ensuring that all members continued in the path of Christ.

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

John Wesley (1703-1791), an Anglican priest who, after a heart conversion under Pietist influence, went to preach to the coal miners of Bristol and thousands upon thousands of other disenfranchised poor people, becoming the founder of Methodism. He was an Oxford trained theologian, but his profound influence on the history of the Church was as a preacher and ecclesiastical organizer. His writings, like those of Luther, tend not to be systematic presentations of theology, but rather are sermons, journal entries, and treatises on particular topics. Scholars who work on many subjects in Wesley’s theology, ethics included, are forced to glean an underlying theology from what is expressed in scattered contexts and on other topics. However, his life and preaching had powerful ethical content as well as their obvious evangelical content.

Stephen D. Long’s study of Wesley’s moral theology seeks to free Wesley from later theologians who view him through the lenses of more recent theological movements. He locates Wesley’s teachings not in the formal modern discipline of “ethics” but in “moral theology,” a term used in Wesley’s time and before. Wesley, Long says, is not someone who cut a new and radical path in his ethical teaching. Rather he
was a participant in a lively and longstanding discussion of moral theology, and someone who both embodied the then-current state of the teaching and made his own faithful contribution to it.

The relevant chapter here is the fourth, on Wesley’s own moral theology. Wesley, showing an inheritance from Augustine and Aquinas, places love foremost among the virtues as that which truly fulfills the law. Even obeying the particular demands of the particular laws of God is not true fulfillment of the law, since love is the true intent of God in the law, and for human life itself. Though his own conversion occurred under the influence of a reading of Luther’s preface to Romans, Wesley gives faith second place behind love, though the infusion of faith by the Holy Spirit is necessary in the living of the law of love. Still, in common with Luther, Wesley sees a change in the person when God by grace infuses faith in a person. Though he sees human nature as depraved prior to this change, all is not lost: there are things within us that “yearn for what is good, right and true” (p. 130). Even in our depraved state we have passions that God has given us, and God uses these passions to lead us back to himself. When grace comes, infusing faith hope and love, our nature is perfected rather than destroyed.

Wesley stands out in the heritage of classical Western theology in this assertion that our nature can be perfected. Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin would all, in their own way, say that in this life sin is inevitable, even when we find ourselves forgiven and righteous before God. We are far, far from perfection, always. Wesley, however, drawing on several passages of Scripture, argues that if one is truly living by faith sin is actually impossible. He makes no strong claim of having such perfection himself or knowing any who do, but he wrote a whole treatise defending the idea that God can act in a person’s heart, shaping their motive so that all is done from love of God and neighbor, and therefore in sinless perfection. He takes the presence of sin as evidence that faith is not having full sway.

Long emphasizes that Wesley’s portrayal of the Christian ethical life makes sense only when one appreciates its foundation in the classical theology of the ancient Church and the creeds of the councils. He roots much of this discussion of Wesley’s moral theology in the biblical assertion that “Christ is our righteousness.” Christ is the incarnation of the second Person of the Trinity, definitively righteous, and he “imputes” this righteousness to believers. Sharing Christ’s righteousness we are drawn into the life of the Trinity.

Righteousness is also “implanted” by God in the believer, and must bear fruit in action. That is, there is also a behavioral imperative: As Christ was righteous both by avoiding evil and by fully doing good, so Methodist people were called to avoid evil and do good—and to make use of the means of grace encountered in the Church’s sacramental life. There must be evidence of one’s righteousness, and that evidence is a life that is shaped by the moral teaching of Jesus, especially as found in the Sermon on the Mount. Mere outward obedience to the teachings of Christ is not the goal, however. The goal is the change of heart of Wesley’s Pietist faith in Christ.

As one sees in Wesley’s life and the shape of the early Methodist movement, this warm-hearted faith could be powerfully expressed in a life of sacrificial service to humanity. Wesley’s radical self-offering through preaching for the salvation of the world, and through unstinting constant labor with and for the poor show best the
implications of his moral theology: His was a life transformed to be like Christ who was
his righteousness, and who gave his own life as a ransom for many.

6. Schneewind, J. B. “Autonomy, Obligation, and Virtue: an Overview of Kant’s Moral
Philosophy.” The Cambridge Companion to Kant. Edited by Paul Guyer.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is the only writer examined here who wrote as a
philosopher rather than as a theologian. Nevertheless, his influence on Christian theology
was great, and one can hardly treat the Enlightenment or the emergence of theological
Liberalism without reference to him. In this regard one thinks first of his Critique of
Pure Reason and the way it undercut confidence in direct knowledge of things, including
God, but his influence on ethical thought was significant as well.

Kant begins his ethical thought with the conviction that each human being (at
least each free, intellectually capable, and, probably, male, human being) is truly
autonomous. That is, we are truly able to make free and responsible ethical decisions.
Though this probably seems an obvious thing to most modern readers, it is hard to
overemphasize how radical a perspective it is historically. Most Christian theologians of
earlier ages (certainly including the first four in this bibliography) held that in some ways
the human being is not, in fact, a completely free moral agent. The Apostle Paul could
state that all of us are slaves—either slaves to God and righteousness, or slaves to sin.
Based on his own tremendous struggles with sin, Augustine could argue against the
Pelagians that absolutely no one can live without sin. Aquinas taught that without the
grace of Christ which comes through the sacraments none of us can truly live in faith or
hope or love. Calvin taught that all human actions, even what we think of as our most
virtuous actions, are motivated to some degree by motives that are self-seeking. And
Luther, in what he believed was his greatest book, The Bondage of the Will, argued
against the humanist Erasmus, who had claimed that human beings have free will.

Kant did not invent the idea. He drew much on Rousseau in this regard. His idea
of human moral autonomy expresses well the individualism and independence of the
Enlightenment period, convinced as they were that humanity had come of age and needed
no more of the political and religious guidance (and oppression) of past ages. Human
beings are “auto-nomous” etymologically meaning we are self ruling, making laws for
ourselves. For a human being to submit to mere external laws, be they laws of the state
or of God, is to be “heteronomous”, meaning ruled by another. This, he thought, could
be no true ethic, since it would diminish the dignity of the autonomous human being.

So what would be a worthy human ethical guide? Should one be motivated by
benevolent feelings of human compassion for the needs of others? Kant says no. Should
we be motivated by the good that will result from our actions, the ethical action being the
one that brings about the most good? Kant says no. In both of these options he sees the
moral necessity coming from our own desires, our own means chosen to meet our own
ends. As well as wanting us to be creating our own laws, Kant is looking for an ethical
obligation that is universal, something that our “practical reason” could not fail to be
obliged to do if we were only perfectly rational. What he provides is a general rule which
he thinks can function as a guide in all practical ethical circumstances, at least for cases
of individuals.
Actually it is a two-fold ethical test, corresponding with two “laws of rational willing” (p. 319). When faced with an ethical decision, a proposed course of action must first pass the test of the “hypothetical imperative”: If we will a particular outcome, we must also will the particular means that will bring about the outcome. You ought to do a particular thing if you want the goal that it leads to. So, if this is the case, the second test comes into play, guided by the “categorical imperative”: “Act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should be a universal law” (p. 320). The reader may note a strikingly vague similarity to the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” However, Kant is attempting to get us to reflect with rigor on the nature of what we do, and his formulation allows it to function as a real test.

He provides the example of someone who wants money, and would get it by making a false promise to repay. Perhaps this seems to fulfill the hypothetical imperative as a desired end and personally acceptable means. (It seems to work for many who take out student loans, after all.) But by the categorical imperative one must consider whether the underlying rule or maxim can be hoped for as a universal law. By this test it fails: If everyone sought money by false promises, quickly no one would believe promises any more, and the making of false promises would not lead to the acquisition of money. This maxim would not work as a universal law, so cannot be an ethical course of action (p. 319-320).

Kant’s theory raises a number of objections, including that not all are convinced that the maxims or rules he drew from it are universally valid, and that he seems to discount the idea that traits of good character lead to moral worth or merit. Still, Kant’s success in convincing us of his ideas has been such that people today do believe that they are free moral agents and that the valid rules are those we impose on ourselves. Indeed, when lecturing on earlier theories of the bondage of the will, students need the most careful explanations to even make sense of them—and still they are not convinced, no matter the magnitude of their own moral battles and failures.

**NINETEENTH CENTURY**


Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768-1834) was a Reformed pastor with a Pietist background who became a major figure in the rise of German liberal theology. As with much Protestant theology through Liberalism and beyond, on many topics Schleiermacher takes Kant as a beginning point or at least as a figure with whom to argue. In this chapter Beiser shows that Schleiermacher had great interest in ethics and projected a major work on the topic though it was never completed. Beiser traces the development of Schleiermacher’s ethics from published writings and lectures during the various phases of his career.

A number of problems arising from Kant or elsewhere in the philosophical milieu occupied Schleiermacher’s attention. First among these was a paradox: He accepted a generally deterministic universe, with all things expressing the outworking of natural laws, but at the same time he believed in human freedom and saw such freedom as being
necessary to moral responsibility. He defends of moral responsibility. The person is responsible, first, if the action taken flows from his or her character and, second, if he or she is free to act differently in the future, changing his or her character. He seems to have argued that we do indeed have freedom, but that we need to realize that even our freedom is given by and expressed according to the laws of nature. In his perspective, moral responsibility actually requires determinism, though the chain of reasoning is beyond the scope of this entry.

Schleiermacher laid great emphasis on “the good,” in particular claiming that ethics needed to focus on “the highest good.” This was a renewal of a very ancient emphasis in ethical thought, and quite different from Kant’s emphasis on moral imperatives and duty. This was the central concept of his incomplete systematic work on ethics. He does emphasize virtue and duty, but it is the pursuit of the highest good which will motivate people to both. It should be central not only to ethical systems but to daily living.

His philosophical explorations of whether life is, in fact, worth living lead to the articulation of an ethic of self-realization. Our living should bring forth our humanity, “our characteristic powers of desiring and willing” (p. 59). This points to the individualism which is one of the major themes of his ethics which he developed under the influence of Spinoza (who emphasized a “principle of individuation”) and the romantics in Berlin. Bringing forth our humanity is not conformity to a general standard, but development of one’s individual uniqueness.

Still, Schleirmacher did not think this possible apart from life in community. He articulated a need for social life as lived in the literary salons of Berlin, where ideas were shared and minds were developed in relation to others—quite apart from the political structures of society emphasized by earlier ethical thinkers. Under the same influence he argued for restoring the high place of love in ethics, and in a more radical way than previously seen. On the one hand he valued even “pathological” love, and on the other his value on love led to an equality of the sexes, at least in moral terms. All this seems quite without reference to Christianity and its doctrinal particulars, but in the era of theological liberalism those particulars were deemphasized. He does argue for the ethical value of “religion” which reveals to us that the infinite is with each of us, and that all of our individual distinctives are needed for society as a whole.

He criticized all previous ethical systems as not being scientific, and sought to develop his as a science, at least by his own definition of science. Ethics is to be a science of the infinite, or the absolute, known subjectively by reason. In a way that seems at least consonant with Hegel, who lived in the same period, Schleiermacher taught that the infinite is being manifested in history by the outworking of natural laws, or even like the life of an organism. For Schleiermacher this means that ethics and history are one, since ethics is human reason acting on nature and “history is essentially the realm in which human beings act in the world” (p. 68). The import of this is to bring every single human action under the lens of ethics, since all we do should pursue the highest good, and all we do is part of the ongoing manifestation of the infinite in history. Nothing we do is morally indifferent.

TWENTIETH CENTURY
Karl Barth (1886-1968) is the towering figure of twentieth-century theology, and certainly the greatest Reformed theologian of the period. He was trained in German Liberal theology under its best proponents, but in the disasters of the World Wars he and others saw the failure of Liberalism’s optimistic vision of human progress. Then, in contrast to the God of Liberalism, who seemed inherent to the very processes of human history, Barth and others rediscovered the transcendence, the “otherness” of the God of the Bible. He became the major figure in Neo-Orthodoxy, a theological movement that grew from Liberalism but left it behind, using its intellectual tools to explore anew the more traditional aspects of Christianity.

Barth’s ethical teaching begins with an objection to Kant’s reduction of Christianity to mere morality, and to the “neo-Kantian” Liberals Ritschl and von Harnack who linked the pursuit of social ethics with the coming of the Kingdom of God. This emphasis on human duty seemed to negate the biblical emphasis on God’s redeeming action toward humanity.

Barth disagreed with Kant’s conception that a reliable ethic could be found by human reasoning. He was convinced, as Kant was, that we are accountable to a mandate, but he believed that this mandate comes to us from God rather than from ourselves. Barth’s sense that the ethical imperative comes to us from the transcendent God could lead one to believe that we are supposed to listen to voices directly from heaven, unencumbered by the need to reason about our choices, but he denied this. Biggar’s chapter provides the contextual nuances to avoid this misconception, particularly in terms of Barth’s Christology, the Trinitarian theology that shapes Barth’s work, and his suspicion of casuistic ethics. Indeed, Biggar notes that if one is looking for clarity about particular ethical cases in the modern world, Barth may not be of help. Barth was critical of ethical systems that had the hubris to proclaim that human beings could gain absolute knowledge of ethics by their own reasoning. Apart from this, however, Barth can provide a rich and thorough theological context for ethical thinking.

In terms of his Christology, Barth is led to understand that any command of God is given by the God revealed in Christ, and so is given for the good purpose of our salvation. This shapes the reason for our obedience: We do not obey a law because it is a law, but because it is good for us. The lawgiver has our best interests at heart.

The doctrine of the Trinity shapes the structure of Barth’s theology in many ways, ethics among them. Looking at the persons of the Trinity through their (admittedly overlapping) functions toward us, the discussion focuses on God as Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer or Sanctifier. The command of God which defines our ethical life, then, is shaped by our threefold relation to God whom we approach as creature, as reconciled sinner, and as heir of ultimate redemption. As creatures we responsible to our creator, to our fellow creatures, to life, and within the constraints and opportunities of time. In relation to God as Reconciler God’s command is heard from our situation of sin and oppression, calling us to freedom and life. God comes to be seen not only as a Creator to be obeyed, but as a loving Father in whom we are able to have absolute trust. In relation
to God as Redeemer we live with the call toward the coming of the Kingdom knowing that we cannot ourselves complete it; God will bring the Kingdom.

Is the command from God to be equated with the commandments of the Bible? Not quite. Barth’s focus is on the Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ and who is revealed in Scripture. He does focus on the Word of God as written in Scripture, but the most important feature even of this is to reveal the person of Jesus Christ. The Bible is not to be used as a rule book, though its imperatives do matter profoundly as we listen for the command of the living God. Instead we start with the Bible we find the story of salvation in God who became incarnate in Jesus. Barth explores this in his systematic theology, which incorporates vast amounts of Scriptural analysis. Only when all this has borne fruit in his Trinitarian theology do the ethical imperatives of Scripture find their place.


Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) is the only American examined here. He is an important Reformed and Neo-Orthodox theologian, and the only one on the list remembered primarily as an ethicist. Gustafson points out that Niebuhr’s interests as a theologian were clearly about issues of morality and politics, and he did not write systematically on the more typical concerns of Christian theologians, such as the Trinity, Christology, justification, and so on. He analyzes Niebuhr’s ethics through four “base points” of method, “circumstances,” anthropology, and theology.

The first issue is method. Theological ethics needs to be clear about how ethical, moral, social choices are to be made. Niebuhr does not elaborate his methodology. Rather Gustafson discerns aspects of Niebuhr’s methodology from his writings on various social ethical issues. Essentially Niebuhr makes “prudential calculations” of the probable outcomes of actions. He seems to actually avoid the application of theories (such as Augustine’s “just war” theory) even when writing on the topics the theories address. Likewise he does not deal with the philosophical objections and issues raised by others. Instead he concerns himself with love, which he takes to be “the law of life” (p. 32) and justice, which Gustafson says he treats as “a principle of equity” (p. 33) without theoretical elaboration. He also discusses moral ideals and law. He contrasts the ideal or transcendent with the historical or actual. The moral ideal functions as a standard by which to judge realities, rather than as something to try to fulfill. The law is to be complied with and is applied to specific cases, both in advance and after the fact. Love bridges the two, being both an ideal and the law.

Gustafson says that the second base point is the interpretation of circumstances, particularly the choice of which circumstances are relevant to moral choices. His discussion here, however, is on the way Niebuhr used Scripture “mythologically,” finding in the crucifixion of Christ or the predictions of the coming Kingdom a revelation of “reality” or life as Niebuhr knows it to be. This accounts for much of Niebuhr’s power and popularity, as he was able to move people to think differently about ethical issues in
society by drawing them evocatively to a new understanding of reality through reflection on Scripture. Theology thus served Niebuhr’s ethical purposes, the opposite of Barth’s use of ethics according to a methodologically superior theology. (Both of the above points confirm Niebuhr’s statement about himself that I once read: allegedly he saw himself not as a theologian, but as “a circuit riding preacher with an interest in ethics.”)

Anthropology is the third. Gustafson states that all ethical theories reflect the assumptions their authors have about the nature of human beings. The ethicist’s anthropology will have implications for what he or she thinks is ethically right. This is the area on which Niebuhr worked most and where he was most influential. Rather than examining what salvation might mean for individuals or the world, he analyzed human nature to account for human potential and human problems on a large scale. He found that only a biblical analysis provided a valid explanation of common human experience, and he built his social analysis on the resultant biblical faith. In his biblical faith, the doctrine of sin had primacy, particularly as expressed in social institutions. (Gustafson notes the contrast here with Barth in whose biblical theology the doctrine of grace had primacy.)

Fourth and finally, Gustafson examines Niebuhr’s doctrine of God, for a theological ethicist’s views of what is good and right will relate to this understanding too. Though Niebuhr strongly objected to Barth’s early emphasis on the transcendence of God, Gustafson argues that in the end he emphasized transcendence more than the immanence of a God who acts in history. Niebuhr is thereby making it possible to see human beings as having freedom to act prudentially, but that still “all human activities are seen as finite and sinful” though not without meaning and not in despair (p. 44).


Liberation theology is the only entry here that refers to a movement rather than an individual. Of course, the entries on individuals are in fact the beginnings of movements in the world of theology. Here, however, the resources I found were about the movement than being studies of such individual formative Liberation thinkers as Gustavo Gutiérrez. Liberation Theology originated among Catholic thinkers in Latin America in the late twentieth century as, in the freedom of thought that came after Vatican II, they explored the needs of the poor in oppressive nation states. A new theology “from below” emerged using a rich mixture of Christian theology (especially analysis of the Gospels, the Prophets, and the events of the book of Exodus) and the social analysis of Karl Marx.

Gorringe acknowledges the wide variety of contextual Liberation Theologies, pointing out that if one examines the specific ethical teachings of them all one can find those who echo any number of classical ethical theories. Instead of arguing that there is one unified ethical approach among them, he examines common themes and emphases. First he shows that in Liberation Theology, the ancient philosophical distinction between theory and practice has been overcome. Often in emphasis the order is reversed: Theology is defined as a second step in the process, as reflection on practice and action. This is much like in the Gospels where Jesus’ disciples engaged in action and then asked him theological questions. It is in contrast to the typical ministry model where one first
goes off to study theology and then tries to jump into action in the church and the world. Enrique Dussel, a major Liberation ethicist, is cited as distinguishing between “morality” (taken to refer to “the norms of the established order”) and “ethics” (taken to “begin with the capacity to hear the voice of the other, which is the moment of conversion”) (p. 127). This may lead the reader to think that Dussel is manipulating the definitions of his words, but that is another matter. What his distinction shows is a priority on compassionate action rather than authoritarian theorizing.

Gorringe refers to the second, third, and fourth themes as methodological pillars of Liberation ethics: The second theme is the priority on “praxis.” This word for action (as opposed to theory) has a variety of meanings among Liberation theologians, but the priority is universal. The general aim of praxis is the transformation of society for the liberation of the oppressed. The third theme is the need for social analysis, particularly through the lens Marxist thought. The impetus to this was the frustrating situation of well-intentioned efforts at development which made agriculture more scientific but led to the poor being still poorer. Marxist thought enabled an exploration of the root causes of poverty and led to a priority on freeing the poor to work for their well-being, or, as Liberation theologians would put it, the belief that God has a “preferential option for the poor.” The fourth theme is the appeal to the Bible. Early on there was a particular emphasis on the Exodus as a paradigmatic salvation story in which God liberated the enslaved Israelites from their oppression by Egyptian authorities. Since then many different contextual Liberation theologies have made use of Scripture in a variety of ways.

Postscript

This small tour of a few major Christian thinkers shows a number of things about Christian ethics. One is the variety of emphases: Some give love the primacy, while others emphasize faith. Some emphasize duty and imperatives, while others emphasize virtues and habits. On the other hand, though, there are some important commonalities. We see an unwillingness to define Christian ethics too simply in behavioral terms, a general unwillingness to say that one has done what is truly good by simple obedience to rules. They are, for the most part, emphatic that the goal is not behavior that is merely socially acceptable and socially productive. The goal is a life that is lived in harmony with God, in a relationship of love and trust toward God, where sins are forgiven and God’s purposes unfold through human relationships in the Church and the world.